Theory and Practice in the Light of Modern Knowledge

Address by

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Theory and Practice in the Light of Modern Knowledge.

I START naturally enough with the conclusions of experimental research into the pharmacology of alcohol, that is to say the position of alcohol amongst the drugs, of which modern medicine possesses such a store.

A Narcotic Drug.

Alcohol is now rightly classed as a narcotic drug, that is, a substance which owes its title to the name of drug to its specific effect upon the nervous system as an agent which induces lowered activity of the nerve cells. The true nature of the action of alcohol was for long obscured by the selective action that it displays, in virtue of which small doses confined their effect to certain portions of the brain functions. Depression of these (seeing that these centres are the supreme controlling ones such as those of self-criticism, self-control and the like) allowed the freer action of lower grade functions and produced a state of chatty, noisy, or even hilarious behaviour, which at first glance might suggest, not narcosis but stimulation. This point needs no labouring. One has but to increase the dose of the drug consumed and entering the circulation,

to see the narcosis effect, in sequence, more and more of the brain centres. So that this stage of freeing of speech and emotion is succeeded first by the blurring of the one and the suppression of the other, and then progressively, the paralysis of even the power of co-ordinated movement, until the stage of intoxicated stupor is with maximum doses followed by a fatal paralysis of the centres which control the heart and muscles of breathing. Still further it is known that even if long practice has enabled some tolerance to be acquired, so that large doses no longer produce these purely nervous effects, this tolerance is acquired by the nervous system alone, and the effects of the drug then fall upon the arteries, liver, kidneys, inducing those degenerative processes which characterise the organs of the chronic alcoholic.

Alcohol, in short, is a drug which, in any dose sufficient to produce an effect at all, produces an effect of a narcotising, paralysing kind.

Its Use Medicinally.

I pass naturally to the place which such a drug has in theory in the practice of medicine. Clearly it is not worthy of the name of stimulant, and in the proper meaning of that term is not so to be used. As a narcotic it may have a place in the pharmacopœia, alongside other narcotics such as opium and its derivatives. Its special property of being to a great extent rapidly burnt up in the body with the liberation of usable energy, gives it the power of providing a supply of body fuel requiring the minimum of chemical change, and as such is sometimes found to be of temporary value. Once the almost inevitable accompaniment of other forms of treatment, a growing recognition of the very limited sphere of proper usefulness of alcohol has led, and is leading, to its gradual disappearance from routine use as a medicine.

Its Habitual Use.

What then are the effects upon the individual who makes habitual use of alcohol in beverage form? The amount that he consumes may be always taken as part of a meal, and so small, so well diluted, that at no time does drug action result, just as in theory a man might choose to add a bitter flavour to his water by adding minute traces of strychnine. But whilst there are some who take alcoholic beverages merely because the flavour is pleasant, most of those who drink either habitually or from time to time, do so to obtain to a greater or lesser degree an appreciable drug effect. Knowing what that drug effect really means, it causes us no surprise to learn that experiments conducted for the purpose have shown that there is no dose of alcohol, little or great, which is able to improve a man's power of work, either mental or physical, to increase his accuracy, or to add to his reserve of energy. Any sensation on the part of the man that he has obtained benefits of this kind are proved by the experimental method to be illusions, illusions born of the very narcotising effect already described. Moreover, addiction to alcohol is a habit most easily acquired, and with this addiction, fostered by the loss of self-control its use produces, there comes the dreaded tendency to increase and increase the amount consumed. So that it is fair to say that an individual who uses alcohol as a beverage is taking something incapable of helping him in any real sense to cope with the tasks of life, and is running the risk of drifting into such a use of it as may result in positive harm.

Alcohol as a Social Factor.

What does modern knowledge tell us of the theoretical effect of alcohol as a social factor? None other than what any thoughtful person might

deduce from what I have already said, that even in the most moderate amount, its use can but lead to the spurious kind of social jollity that follows lessened restraint, and the removal of natural but none the less proper inhibitions. Its use in more than moderate amounts can but convert consideration into thoughtlessness, chaff into brutality, responsibility into recklessness. Hence the dreadful power it possesses of becoming an agent of unhappiness, of cruelty, of danger, not confined to him who takes it, but acting chiefly upon others, wholly innocent, wives, children, friends, or any person in fact, at the time within his sphere of influence.

Its Economic Effects.

And so to the economic side. Alcohol is not cheap, but 288 millions, the amount spent upon it last year in this country, will buy a good deal, and it is difficult to believe that the bulk purchase and consumption of beverages, whose distinctive factor is the substance I have described, can be economically sound. Sir Josiah Stamp, in a recent lecture, weighing as an economist all the factors, and they are many, and judging as he would in the case of other things such as the use of tobacco, or gambling, finds that an economic gain of about 10 per cent. is to be considered as likely to result to this country from the cessation of the manufacture, distribution and consumption of alcoholic beverages.

Time does not allow me to complete this side of my theme by marshalling before you all the data which make up the indictment of alcohol as a beverage. But I submit that, if even this incomplete case were presented to some hypothetical autocrat who desired the success and real happiness of his subjects, he could find no justification for the existence of alcoholic beverages, and every reason for their total elimination.

Public Indifference.

So much for the theory. Now what about our practice? It may be conceded at once that the facts I have put before you are not universally known. But it is universally recognised, and has been for many a generation, that the drink problem is a fundamental national problem, and the facts about it are readily available for all who desire to know. How is it then that there is entirely lacking any desire on the part of those active in public or local affairs to face the facts? It is not as if to-day as a nation we were economically in such smooth water that a little waste did not matter, or that efficiency all round was so high that some little loss was negligible, or that happiness was so universal and uniform that there was no call to seek out and remove removable causes of unhappiness. Our present national state suggests the very reverse of these propositions, and yet there is lacking any sign of a determination to take the steps that common sense would seem to dictate. In other words, whilst theory forms a clamant basis for vigorous action, no action is taken.

The Strength of the Drink Trade.

To what cause or causes are we to attribute this sorry state of affairs? As Temperance workers and enthusiasts, it is surely of supreme importance to try to answer this question. There was a time a generation or two ago when, alongside the fight for such public action as would lessen the obvious ill-effects that drink was producing, there was need for searching inquiry as to why these evil results followed this cause. To-day we have all the information which enables us to demonstrate the links between cause and effect. And the business of the Temperance advocate is narrowed in my judgment

to the single, I do not say simple, one, of eliminating drink and all its attendant evils. What then are the causes of lack of vigorous action towards this end? First and foremost, I would unhesitatingly say the strength of the drink trade. It is a lamentable thought that the best organised, and one of the wealthiest of our large industries, is the one whose business is the production and sale of liquor. Can you tell me of a single other industry in this country whose increased prosperity inevitably spells increased harm to our people, and whose total collapse would be an unmixed blessing all round? And yet this trade, occupying this tragically unique position, is possessed of enormous power.

This power is exercised in so many ways, some obvious, such as lavish and unscrupulous advertisement, and organised opposition to all Temperance efforts; others, more subtle, such as the payment of large dividends to a big body of shareholders, control of whole sections of the press, and the support of its friends as candidates for public posts of all kinds, create a state of mind in countless otherwise level-headed people, in which what I call theory is quietly ignored. It exercises, in fact, just the same kind of narcotising effect upon the critical faculty of people as does the moderate use of alcohol itself.

Desire for Self-Indulgence.

We are all of us apt to see only what we want to see. The influence and power of the drink trade robs millions of our people of the desire to see the truth about alcohol. Whether they admit it or not, the activities of the trade in one direction or another suggest to these people that their selfish interests will be best served by letting things be. This leads me naturally to what surely is the second great cause of national apathy. To countless

numbers of well-meaning people who are prepared to admit the truth of all that is said against alcohol, its elimination or serious curtailment would mean some interference with their own self-indulgence. "Because others cannot exercise their self-control," they say, "why should we be robbed of something which we use so wisely that we derive pleasure only and no harm from it?" "Why should social life be robbed of one of its jolly accompaniments, blessed at least by long custom, if not by anything more worthy?"

A Moral Issue.

Does it surprise you that we find that the conflict between theory and practice would appear to arise solely from the inherent selfishness of the human heart? And the issue appears in its true light as neither economic nor physiological, but fundamentally a moral one. It is within the memory of all of us that the crisis of the Great War added temporarily to the ranks of the anti-drink party, whole masses of people who were in no sense Temperance advocates. As a result, with the concurrence of the people as a whole, restrictions were imposed on the manufacture and also on the sale of liquor, of a stringency never before attempted in this country, and never since maintained. At its lowest, this was a gesture of unselfishness in one direction to ensure the selfish end of self-preservation. At its highest, it was a readiness for self-sacrifice in the hour of struggle for a great moral issue. In any case, what happened in this matter in those years is full of teaching.

The Hope of Progress.

There is no shadow of doubt in my mind that, perhaps with setbacks, slowly but surely the

theoretical knowledge in regard to drink will grip the imagination of more and more thinking people, and as surely if as slowly, the consumption of liquor will diminish, and the harm resulting from it lessen. But I feel equally sure that, if the pace of this advance is to be really quickened, it can only be by a wholesale change of heart amongst people who count,—a change of heart by which their eyes are opened, and, seeing in their full significance the facts of which you and I are well aware, they resolve to ally themselves with the anti-drink section of the people, giving of their time, their influence, their vote, that the lives of others may be helped, whatever their own little loss.

It might happen that laws will yet be passed to control still further the manufacture and sale of liquor, dictated by the relatively sordid motives of economic efficiency or industrial safety.

How much more to be desired is the cessation of the habit of taking alcohol from a widespread, individual unselfishness.

What an array of ugly words we are forced to use in this connection. Strong drink, Alcohol, The Trade, Prohibition, none of these are to be found in a poet's dictionary. And now Lady Horsley has added yet another, at first sight the ugliest of all, to the list. Did you read the other day at the conclusion of her evidence before the Commission she described herself as, not a Prohibitionist but a Renunciationist?"

Ugly, yes, but none the less ideal. Surely in that word is the gospel for all Temperance effort to-day, renunciation, the voluntary giving up—not to prolong our own lives, and safeguard our own health, but to make our full contribution to the betterment of our national life, believing it possible in our day to see the lessons of Teetotal Theory translated in their fulness into Teetotal Practice.

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